HEART OF THE MATTER

Culver Academy Baccalaureate Service
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There is a great moment in the classic motion picture, "The Graduate," when Benjamin, recently graduated from college, is uncomfortably standing around - hanging out I think you might put it - at the party his parents have thrown to celebrate the great occasion. It has turned into something of an adult cocktail party, and a man approaches the graduate, drink in hand, and says, with that cryptic sense of someone with inside information: "One word Benjamin, one word - plastics."

Well, I have one word. It is a verb, not a noun. The word is love and I want actually to use it three ways - three loves, actually.

Love God - Love Neighbor - Love Self

There is something wonderfully unchanging about what we are doing this morning. Come May and June, year-in year-out, one generation gathers and tries to find appropriate words to say to the next generation; as yet another younger generation fidgets, wiggles in pews, or folding chairs and generally laments the length and sobriety of the whole exercise. The older ones - the audience, as it were - sit up and take notice. Having had the unusual opportunity of sitting there as a participant and a parent and standing here as a baccalaureate preacher, a number of times, my sense is that the older ones are the ones paying the most attention.

In fact, I cannot recall a single word in the various baccalaureate sermons directed toward me on several occasions. In fact, in the soft, green blur which is my memory of several graduations, I cannot recall the identity of a single baccalaureate or commencement speaker - a sobering fact, I conclude. What I do recall is that my family was there, my parents. And so they are this morning, and they are listening intently.

They have a very great deal invested - of their hope, and love and cash. They are filled this weekend with pride. They will reach for hankies a lot. The supporting cast for this drama, the faculty and administration of the institution, are also proud and relieved. They hope your bills are paid; they will follow you, be watching with attentiveness as your lives unfold. They'll be very pleased if you remember their names. And you, the actors in the drama - the principals for whom all this hoopla is arranged - you're excited and I hope pleased, as proud as you normally allow yourselves to be; maybe a little humble and even grateful, uncertain. frightened. And, I do recall, very distracted.

It's one of those occasions that looms a little "larger than life" and a lot larger than anyone's ability to speak meaningfully to it. Garrison Keillor told a graduating class a few years ago that the one thing they could always count on in this life was their parents' worrying. He was right, of course. They always have worried about you. They always will. In fact, on graduation day parents worry whether their youngsters, under their graduation robes, are pressed and tucked-in and have a clean handkerchief in their pockets, although this institution certainly allays some of those anxieties! In fact, maybe that's why they sent you here - they would never again have to worry about whether your shirt was tucked-in.

Beyond the minor parental worrying, we are concerned about how it will be for you, from here on out. We're worried because we're not as buoyant and hopeful about the future as we used to be.

We're worried because it is not an innocent, primal wilderness we're sending you out to conquer, but in many ways a first class mess with a lot of critical problems all coming to a head at once.

Sometimes, after we read the morning paper we say a little prayer of gratitude that we are not you. We're handing you a lot of problems - a country with the highest violent crime rate in the world, highest drug use, highest percentage of its own citizens in jail, highest infant mortality rate among developed nations, a nation with major crises in health care, education and the simple ability of its cities to function.

So that's why we still have baccalaureate, I think - to thank God that you made it, that we are here on this glorious occasion, but also, because we're worried and it's not unlike old Frederick Nietzsche, who used to tip his hat whenever he walked by a church even though he had already announced the death of God - just in case. Nothing lost, if he is dead. But if God is not dead, tipping his hat seemed like a prudent gesture.

At Baccalaureate someone not directly involved in the academic regimen you have completed is asked to come in and say a few things to put all of this in a larger context - and the word I want to say is just this - "Love."

Love God

Love your neighbor

Lover your self

They are not original with me. Jesus of Nazareth said them, brought them together in the same sentence actually, because they are not original with him either. Rather they are at least 500 years older than he. He learned them as a child as he studied in synagogue.

One day a lawyer asked him a few tough questions, designed to cause him to trip up. The first is about taxes, the second about divorce and remarriage - two topics about which we and the attorneys among us are still fussing.

And then this:

What is the great commandment of the law? What is the one thing you have to know in order to live a good life - a life God wants you to live?

Everybody knows the answer. It's in the Book of Deuteronomy. "You shall love God with all your heart, soul and mind." There was no other answer.

But then, having told them what they already knew, he went one better and pulled something out of an obscure corner of the Scripture:

"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

They knew that one too. What they had probably never thought of is the relationship between the two commandments to love. Separately they are not unique. Love God. Love neighbor. Together they fundamentally alter the religious landscape and the ethical and ultimately the political landscape. And when you add one more, "as you love yourself" you have forever altered religion.

Jesus puts the command to love neighbor on an equal footing with the basic imperative to love God and suggests that the way to fulfill the first is by doing the second. How, after all, do you go about loving God? Organized religion, of course, never has a shortage of suggestions:

- kill a spotless lamb or a bull,
  let the blood run down over the altar,
  burn the dead animal;

- abstain from evil, don't kill, steal
  or cheat, obey the religious rules;

- say prayers, sing hymns, go to church,
  perform the religious rituals;

- send your donation tonight so this
  TV ministry can continue to do God's work
  and you will receive a blessing and an
  8 x 10 glossy print of the open tomb.

Jesus forever altered the way we think about religion by proposing that the abstract imperative to love God becomes concrete, specific, tangible and doable in the person of the neighbor. Forget the sacrifices, the bloody altars and burning flesh; forget the legalistic moralisms and rigid pieties. Love your neighbor. Who is your neighbor? He answered that in a memorable story about a man set upon by robbers and left to die until rescued by a Good Samaritan. Neighbor is the one who needs you.

It is our secret. The good news of God's unconditional love is inseparable from the necessity of putting love to work in the trenches, as it were, in the human relationships which characterize all of our lives. Love God and love neighbor as self.

It seems simple, but it's not. There are complications and the first one is the neighbor. Sometimes he appeals to us, touches our hearts. But sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes the neighbor is obnoxious. Sometimes your neighbor is dirty, doesn't smell very good, doesn't want your help, is abusive. Sometimes a neighbor is to be avoided at all costs. Robert Frost reminded us that a good, stout fence makes good neighbors.

After the Birmingham Church bombing which resulted in the deaths of several little children, Martin Luther King, Jr. said that it's a good thing Jesus didn't command us to like our neighbors.

"Like" is a sentimental and affectionate word. How can we be affectionate to a person who is threatening to kill our children?

"Love is greater than like," he concluded.

And different. Love, King said, means "creative good will" - and he didn't say, but we know, that may mean not liking the neighbor at all.

The Judeo-Christian tradition and its Scripture is clear about one thing. And that is that you and I can't go it alone. We're not made to go it alone. You are made for relationship, community, mutuality - in a word, for love. Biblical religion wants to make lovers of everybody.

A second problem with loving neighbor as self is the "as self" part.

We have been told, sometimes all our lives, that the self part of us isn't so good. We've been reminded that we are sinners, that a good synonym for sin is selfishness. And, we conclude it would seem, love of self is to be avoided, or at least discreetly disguised. What possibly could Jesus have meant?

Fortunately, we've learned, thanks to the psychologists and psychiatrists, that you can't love God or anybody else for that matter, if you have no self-esteem. We know now that if you don't think of yourself as valuable, worthy, loveable, you are condemned to a lifetime of either acting out your resentment and anger, or pathetically trying to become worthy and valuable and loveable.

We know now the appalling societal consequences when a whole generation of people grow up having been told that they are not valuable, worthwhile. We know the tragic stories of thousands of young men and women in urban ghettos who are not going to make it because the clearest word spoken to them from the day of their birth has been spoken in a variety of very effective ways from negligence, to physical violence, to the fact that the schools they attend are underfunded. That word is:

"You are not wanted.

You are not important.

You are not worth anything.

You are not loved."

And we also know there is a powerfully positive side to the "as self" part as well.

Dr. Bernie Siegel is a surgeon at Yale who spends most of his time with patients who have cancer. He has, over the years, carefully observed the relationship between how one feels about oneself, how one feels about others, and one's physical health.

When people feel unloveable, their ability to love shrivels up. There is nothing more deadly than that, he concludes.

Siegel is convinced that "unconditional love is the most powerful known stimulant to the immune system" and there is evidence that he is right.

A study at the Menninger Foundation added scientific data to the euphoria and aliveness which accompany "being in love." People who are in a loving relationship feel good about themselves and simply feel good. Have you noticed? I hope so! The Menninger people discovered that there are reasons. They have less lactic acid in their blood and so feel less tired; their white cells are more responsive and their endorphin levels increase so they feel less pain. So, there is something to that incredible sensation of loving someone who loves you.

So maybe we need a whole new way of thinking religiously, a way that encourages us to love the world instead of hating or distrusting the world as an evil, sinful place, as religion always does, precisely because we want to love God..., we need a way of being religious that begins with our own worth as children of God and then proceeds to love the neighbor.

God knows the world needs people with hearts big enough to love.

There are ecological and environmental issues confronting us which are so big that until now the best political response we have come up with is to deny that they exist.

There are economic issues confronting our cities and our nation that are so big and so complex that the best we can come up with is to put off the resolution until next year and hope you and your children will pay the bill.

There are human issues in our center cities so complex and difficult that the best we can do is wring our hands and stop getting off the expressway at those exits.

This love of God and neighbor and self is anything but a theological abstraction. It is the opposite, in fact, of religion traditionally defined as other worldly piety... contrary, the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin... arguing over the color of the vestments while poor people starve to death on the church doorstep. This religion is social - political. Love means getting involved, getting your hands dirty, being responsible. So, the baccalaureate word is "love": Become a lover.

Love this precious life - every minute of it. Be open to wonder and beauty and mystery. Be a lover of the world, of starry nights and hot summer days, of music and wind in the trees and the laughter of children. Love life so much you feel pain when it is denied elsewhere. Love it so much you are hurt when people are oppressed, discriminated against, hungry, cold, poor. Love life enough to get angry when it is taken for granted.

Love your family: never forget to tell them you love them. Sometime today make yourself do something that may be difficult and embarrassing. You may never have done it before, or not for a very long time. Tell them, your parents - your significant adults - look them in the eye and say it, "I love you." Love your community, your school, your nation. Love enough to allow tears of affection to be a benediction on your life.

Now the basic dilemma is that you can't love God until you love your neighbor and you can't love anybody until you love yourself. And you can't love yourself unless somebody tells you you are loveable, shows you that you are worth loving.

That's what real religion is - a good word about us. Christianity begins not as a religion, but as good news that we are loved: that the Creator of the universe loves us, intends us, knows us, has given the life of an only son for the sole purpose of showing us how dearly we are loved.

I think the man wanted to know. He was missing something. He had tried to be good, had followed all the rules and it didn't feel right. He missed the connection between the love of God, his love for his neighbor and his love for himself.

And so 2,000 years ago, he has our question on his lips. It is the question before you. "What is the great commandment? How are we going to live fully and responsibly in the future?"

Jesus made a lover of that man, I like to think. I like to think that because of his encounter with Jesus he actually began to like himself and then he began to love the world and his family and his neighbors, and his city and nation.

God wants that for all of us.

God wants to make a life-long lover out of you.

May God give you grace, mercy and peace. May the God who has brought you to this hour give you courage and love for the journey. Amen.